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**Joint Inspection Unit**

# Report of the Joint Inspection Unit on knowledge management in the United Nations system

## Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit herewith, for the consideration of the General Assembly, his comments and those of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Knowledge management in the United Nations system" (JIU/REP/2007/6).[1]

* A/63/150 and Corr.1.

[1] Compiling the comments of CEB on reports of the Joint Inspection Unit requires extensive and frequent consultation with agencies throughout the system, which sometimes delays the production and submission of the report. CEB regrets any inconvenience this may cause.

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*Summary*

The report of the United Nations system Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) on knowledge management in the United Nations system (JIU/REP/2007/6) examines issues relating to knowledge management activities within the organizations of the United Nations system.

The present report presents the views of the United Nations system organizations on the recommendations provided by JIU in its report. The views of the system have been consolidated on the basis of inputs provided by member organizations of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) who welcomed the report, with many indicating that its timing coincides with their own activities in the area of knowledge management and sharing. Noting the difficulty of covering in depth a topic as broad as knowledge management, the organizations stressed that the recommendations did not always convey the complexity involved in developing a comprehensive knowledge management strategy and that some of the recommendations lacked a clear cost-benefits analysis to determine their viability. Nevertheless, the organizations appreciated the overall thrust of the report and expressed the view that it added significantly to this important area for the entire United Nations system.

# I. Introduction

1. The Joint Inspection Unit report on knowledge management in the United Nations system (JIU/REP/2007/6) presents a review of the knowledge management activities in place within the organizations of the United Nations system. Noting the broad nature of the subject, the report focuses primarily on those elements considered of greatest relevance by the organizations and individuals surveyed for a sound implementation of knowledge management across the system. Among its observations, the review found a lack of a common understanding of knowledge management throughout the United Nations system and that many organizations did not have formal knowledge management strategies. The report goes on to note the role that information technology plays in the knowledge management arena and describes some of the obstacles and drivers for implementing a knowledge management programme. The five recommendations contained in the report, directed at executive heads (2), governing bodies (1) and the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) (2), seek to enhance the coordination of system-wide knowledge management activities through the development of, inter alia, common terminologies and guidelines for the development of knowledge management strategies and to strengthen each organization's knowledge management activities by, inter alia, conducting knowledge inventories and developing knowledge management strategies.

# II. General comments

2. CEB members, noting the difficulty of studying a topic as broad as knowledge management, welcomed the report, with many indicating that its timing coincides with their own efforts in this area. In their responses, the organizations stressed that the recommendations, while practical and direct, did not always convey the complexity of the challenges the organizations face when developing knowledge management strategies. Many noted that the report, which clearly described the differences between "information" and "knowledge" in its introduction, did not always communicate the importance of this distinction in its recommendations. For example, the organizations noted that the suggested approach to addressing knowledge management issues focused principally on the explicit knowledge in publications and databases, among others, without any significant consideration for knowledge of a more "tacit" nature, such as that embedded in the experience of staff members. Nevertheless, the organizations welcomed the broad thrust of the report, along with the annexes thereto which, they noted, presented a useful overview of knowledge management activities across the system. In addition, several agencies reported that they had derived much value from participation in the United Nations system-wide knowledge management task force, which is mentioned throughout the report, and had benefited from shared perspectives and lessons learned, thus enhancing the understanding of knowledge management issues across the system.

# III. Specific comments on recommendations

Recommendation 1: CEB, through its High-level Committee on Management, should develop:

(a) A common definition of knowledge management to be used by all United Nations system organizations;

(b) A glossary of common terminology, which can be used in the development of knowledge management strategies and initiatives;

(c) A minimum common set of guidelines to be used as the basis for each United Nations organization in the development of its own knowledge management strategy.

3. The organizations recognize that system-wide agreements on the definition of and approaches to knowledge management currently do not exist, and therefore generally support the spirit behind this recommendation. Agencies note that the development of definitional frameworks and guidelines could bring much-needed clarity to the concept and boundaries of knowledge management, and emphasize the importance of continuous sharing of views and experience among United Nations agencies as the definitions and guidelines are put into practice.

4. However, while the organizations agree on the necessity and desirability of common definitions and guidelines, they question the role of CEB in this activity. In particular, they stress that the idea of CEB owning substantive work does not seem plausible as it lacks the capacity and resources to effectively produce those outputs and should instead focus its role on the coordination of the knowledge management activities carried out by the agencies. Furthermore, the organizations note that while developing those outputs, the system should remain conscious of and take steps to mitigate the risk that they may become too academic or general to be of any practical use and therefore should ensure that these outputs are developed with practical implementation in mind.

Recommendation 2: the executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should:

(a) Survey the knowledge needs of the clients (internal and external) of their organizations;

(b) Undertake an in-house knowledge inventory for each organization;

(c) Identify and address the potential knowledge gaps existing between the needs of clients and the knowledge available within each organization;

(d) Ensure that each organization develops, or revises, its own knowledge management strategy based on the above points and on guidelines to be developed by CEB.

5. While CEB members broadly support this recommendation, many indicated that it lacks some key components. For example, the organizations suggested that subparagraph (c) of the recommendation should include the need to prioritize the knowledge gaps identified in the survey along with the identification of the knowledge source so as to validate the requirements identified. They further suggest that the activities embedded within this recommendation would be best integrated with strategic or other planning processes and be conducted with some regularity, since knowledge management requirements can evolve over time.

6. More significantly, the organizations took note that the suggested approach to creating a knowledge management strategy (survey needs, inventory existing capacity and identify and fill gaps) presents a simplistic view of how to address the

knowledge needs of an organization. They also noted that the analysis that underpins this recommendation appears to present knowledge and information as almost equivalent terms, and therefore runs the risk of conveying an incomplete picture of how to develop a knowledge management strategy. The recommendation, the organizations noted, does not mention the processes by which knowledge is acquired, mobilized and exchanged, and those processes can in themselves cause overlaps and gaps. Furthermore, the organizations stress that complying with this recommendation could take years and could entail substantial costs, as they would require establishing knowledge management units for that purpose (as proposed in recommendation 3), and as knowledge needs reorganizing and updating, the units would become permanent. Finally, they note that the challenges of changing people's behaviour to facilitate and encourage the sharing of knowledge could prove a difficult hurdle and should not be underestimated.

Recommendation 3: the General Assembly and the respective governing bodies of the United Nations system organizations should make the necessary provisions for the establishment of dedicated knowledge management units within each organization. The knowledge management units should be provided with the necessary financial and human resources, according to the dimension and specific needs of each organization.

7. The organizations expressed limited and qualified support for this recommendation. They note that in many organizations knowledge management activities emanate from information and communications technology units and agree that a separate entity might facilitate the mainstreaming of knowledge sharing activities into the regular work of staff members. However, they point out that the report does not present any cost-benefit basis for a recommendation of this nature, despite the clear financial implications. In this vein, and given the limited resources available, the organizations took note that the report did not describe how knowledge management activities could proceed in the absence of a specific unit. Many organizations further expressed concern about the lack of clear guidance regarding the focus of those units, and many believe that while it might be useful to implement the recommendation, it should not be a precondition for developing and implementing a quality knowledge management programme, especially given the tight resource constraints under which the organizations are currently operating.

Recommendation 4: CEB should review the possibility of developing a common search engine, which can facilitate interoperability and access by the different United Nations organizations to knowledge and information, including Intranets and databases, available across the United Nations system.

8. The organizations support the concept of exploring the value and viability of creating a common search engine. They note that such a capability might facilitate interaction among organizations seeking synergies/complementarities and best practices in knowledge management. In particular, they note that a search solution, which leverages the indexing and search capabilities already in production, might produce faster results than a wholly new indexing and search engine. However, CEB members stress that this recommendation should also include the creation of an inter-agency network that extends knowledge sharing beyond common search capabilities and addresses some of the core issues related to the ability of the organizations to access information across institutional boundaries. Furthermore, they point out that a search engine alone, without the systematic organization of

content repositories and common metadata standards, will not improve user experience in searches. Finally, as noted in their responses to the other recommendations, the organizations believe that the inclusion of a business case that outlines the costs and benefits implications of a system-wide search would have been useful, since many agencies are not in a position to participate in new cost-shared activities unless they entail potential savings or significant efficiency improvements. Such a detailed analysis would include an assessment of whether or not existing search engines can fulfil the requirements of the United Nations system.

Recommendation 5: the executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should establish knowledge sharing competencies as one of the criteria to be assessed in the staff performance appraisal system.

9. The organizations welcomed this recommendation as a critical component for the success of any knowledge management strategy. They took note of the need for a closer connection between knowledge sharing activities and staff performance, as well as for closer integration of knowledge sharing/knowledge management into their results-based management frameworks. Agencies also stressed that this recommendation might require incentives and opportunities for capacity-building of the required competencies along with an environment conducive to sharing knowledge. While many agencies indicated that they had already begun to implement components of the recommendation, others called for a more broad-based approach that would more fully address the obstacles that were identified by both the Office of Internal Oversight Services in its report on the thematic evaluation of knowledge management networks in the pursuit of the goals of the Millennium Declaration and the present report. Specifically, the organizations pointed to the cultural limitations that inhibit knowledge sharing within organizations as well as the lack of leadership support and of the incentives and rewards that encourage knowledge sharing.